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ABSTRACT

English teachers' approaches to the problems of assessment and evaluation have been characterized by uncertainty and confusion, and this uncertainty is communicated to students. It is not simply that students do not know "how" they are being judged; they do not know "when" they are being judged. They soon begin to stop taking risks and fail to articulate their difficulties. These considerations have led to a model of evaluation, to guide teachers in their day-to-day work, that can be applied to individual instructional units, or over a longer time period. In the space of a single unit, the teacher is required to undertake four quite distinct evaluative tasks: (1) monitoring and describing performance, (2) reflecting on progress, (3) appreciating or judging quality, and (4) determining accomplishments and what should be undertaken next. The model demands that teaching be so organized that students know when each of these tasks is or is not in progress. The model urges teachers to recognize that many of the students' experiments and mistakes are a necessary part of the learning process, that such experiences are confidential to the learning process and should not be the basis for judging the quality of the students' work. It reminds teachers that it is not necessary that the product of every unit be judged. It also suggests that an important part of the teacher's role is to encourage the students to develop self-evaluation skills. (HOD)

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A MODEL FOR EVALUATION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Brian Johnston and Ken Watson

A paper prepared for the Invitational Seminar on
English Evaluation, Montreal, Canada, May 1983
presented by Ken Watson.

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A MODEL FOR EVALUATION IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

A paper prepared for the Pre-Conference Seminar on Evaluation, Montreal 1983 by Brian Johnston, Research Officer of the South Australian Department of Education, and Ken Watson, Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Sydney, and presented by Ken Watson.

It is stating the obvious to say that English teachers' approaches to the problems of assessment and evaluation have been characterised by uncertainty and confusion. It is often not realised, however, that this uncertainty is communicated to (or perhaps simply shared by) their students. When, a few years ago, over one thousand students in six secondary schools in New South Wales were polled about their attitudes to English, it became clear that some, at least, were conscious of deficiencies in the area of assessment:

"I do not get anything out of compositions where you write something and get back a mark and don't know how you got that mark".

- Boy, Year 8.

"We are told that reading, writing and listening are important parts of English, but we are judged only on how good we are as writers".

- Girl, Year 9

"What does 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ /10 really mean?

- Boy, Year 9

It is not simply that pupils do not know how they are being judged; they do not know when they are being judged. Lacking that knowledge, they often feel that they are being judged every time they open their mouths in class, every time they do any sort of 'public' writing (as opposed to private journals). Inevitably, they begin to play safe. They ask questions and offer opinions only when they think that these will be judged 'sensible'; they do not voice their difficulties; they are afraid to experiment for fear of making errors. Yet it is often the apparently silly question that reveals where students most need help, and it is often only through risk-taking -

in speech or writing - that children expand their linguistic range. It is very much to be regretted that, at least in Australian schools, the concept of the virtuous error is not widely held - by students or teachers.

These considerations led us ⁽¹⁾ to construct a model of evaluation which would guide teachers in their day-to-day work. Most secondary English teachers claim to plan units of varying length for their pupils; this model was designed as one that could be applied to each unit as well as to work over a longer period. We wanted a model which could easily be internalised by teachers, and which would alert them both to the need to base their judgments on sound criteria and to make pupils aware that it is possible for the teacher to adopt, for at least some of the time, a supportive, non-judgmental role.

In the space of a single unit the teacher is called upon to undertake four quite distinct tasks which can be grouped under the heading 'evaluation'.

1. monitoring and describing students' performance in order to help them overcome difficulties and enable them to articulate and understand what they can do;
2. reflecting on the progress of the unit: determining, for example, whether the students have perceived content, audience, degree of abstraction in the way originally intended;
3. appreciating or judging the quality of students' products;
4. determining, in the light of both process and product, what should be undertaken next.

Our model demands that teaching be so organised that students know when (1) and (2) are going on and (3) isn't. It urges teachers to recognise that many of the students' experiments and mistakes are a necessary part of the learning process; that such things are confidential to the learning process and not the basis for judging the quality of the students' work. It reminds teachers that it is not necessary that the product of every unit be judged; sometimes it is sufficient that there be appreciation, by teacher and class. It also suggests that an important part of the teacher's role is to encourage the students to develop skills of self-evaluation.

A MODEL FOR ASSESSMENT IN ENGLISH

MONITORING/DESIGNING

LEARNING/TEACHING PROCESS

Freedom to experiment

Teacher monitors descriptively to help individuals in their development, make available extra resources etc.

Pupils must feel free to take risks without being judged on their success or failure.

REFLECTING

REFLECTION

How have the pupils perceived content, audience, degree of abstraction etc?

Confidential to the learning situation.

JUDGING/ASSESSING

PRODUCT

E.g., Folder of pupil-selected writing, cassette, performance of play, various forms of imaginative re-creation of literature.

Many products will be the subject of appreciation rather than judgment/assessment. If there is to be grading, pupils should be aware of this and should know the criteria upon which judgment will be made. Pupils should have control over what is presented for judgment.

LOOKING/ASSESSING

PROSPECT/RETROSPECT

Pupils: What have I learned?
Teacher: Where do we go from here?

Pupils should be encouraged to develop skills of self-evaluation. The teacher will have to decide whether to build further upon what has been achieved, or whether a change of direction is needed.

Elements of the Model

1. Monitoring and Describing

Traditionally, teacher feedback aimed at helping the student overcome his/her difficulties has been confined to comments on the product, particularly the written product. More often than not, such feedback has been decidedly unhelpful. For example, a sample of over 400 marked scripts from eight New South Wales high schools yielded the following data:

Work bearing neither numerical/letter mark nor written comment. (Included here were scripts bearing ticks and having punctuation/spelling errors marked out).	29.9%
Work bearing numerical/letter mark but nothing else apart from marking out of spelling errors etc.	16.94%
Work bearing a generalised comment (eg 'Good work', 'More effort needed').	23.86%
Work bearing a specific comment showing that the teacher is responding to what the pupil is trying to say.	16.3%

(Watson, 1981, p 127)

Similarly, a recent Scottish survey of teachers' written responses to students' essays and poems reported:

"The comments tell the pupil what is wrong or (much less often) right with his performance; but, except in relation to rule-governed aspects of English teaching, such as punctuation and spelling, identification of what is wrong or right is in highly generalized, vague terms".

(Research by McAlpine quoted in Brown, 1981).

We must do better than this.

Feedback while work is in progress is essential, but the teacher should not feel obliged always to have to make suggestions for improvement. If suggestions for improvement or diagnoses occur spontaneously to the teacher, naturally he/she will voice them, but it is often sufficient that the teacher dwell on what the student has done, articulating the achievement as clearly as possible. Often articulate recognition alone will help the student more than a welter of suggestions. To take an example, Andrew,

a Year 9 boy, wrote the following short piece in class:

Deep in the dungeons he stands, chained to a cold jagged stone wall. He looks up into the corner to see a tiny hole, where the light shines onto a corner. The light is flickering on off, on off from the gulls. As he watches, the light fades away, slowly until he can see no more.

It is not enough that Andrew leave the class knowing that the teacher liked the piece. At the same time, it is not necessary to give him suggestions for developing it. What is important is that he leave knowing that he has drawn a strong contrast between the freedom of the gulls and the confinement of the dungeon, using the light as a connecting device. (Many Year 9 students use contrast well, and they can quickly understand the concept when it is applied to their own writing).

In the case of first-draft writing, Brian Johnston has suggested that the teacher look at the work and ask:

"Do I have a sense of this as a bold statement, a gift? Can I understand why the writer sees this topic as significant? Or do I want more information to let me know how the writer feels about this?"

Where I can see an importance I may not need to do much: just let the student know that I've got the message ... and indicate the sense of boldness or importance that I get from it ...

My main purpose in these responses is to recognise ... the power of the students' writing. This can be a dramatic surprise for students who think of themselves as bad writers, and some of them open up quite quickly when they get this recognition.

(Johnston, 1983a)

Similarly, the teacher can monitor small-group discussion by a series of questions aimed at helping the students take stock of what has been achieved at a particular point (something that children often find very difficult to do by themselves). He/she may respond to talks by highlighting the strong parts or articulating a subjective interpretation in terms of a 'centre' and the perceived relation between the parts. Students can also learn to give this very simple, powerful feedback to one another.

2. Reflecting

This 'taking stock' step is a vital part of the model. The dynamic nature of the interaction in the English classroom means that the outcomes may be very different from those intended at the beginning of a unit. The teacher may have altered the direction of the unit because the students have offered suggestions superior to his/her own; the students may have perceived content and level of abstraction in terms quite different from those the teacher had in mind when the unit was planned. If judgments are to be made, they must be made in terms of what actually took place in the course of the unit. In particular, students must not be penalised for failure of communication that may, in part at least, have been the teacher's fault.

To take an actual example, a teacher designed a unit in which one group in a Year 8 class had to prepare a document describing Sydney's beaches. The teacher conceived this task in terms of factual, expository writing; the students concerned interpreted it in terms of the more emotive language of the travel brochure. As part of the monitoring process, the teacher noted the change of direction and decided not to deflect the pupils from their interpretation. In our model, the teacher, in the course of reflecting on what has gone on, would remind himself that the particular group would have to be judged in terms of their understanding of the task.

In a second example, a teacher reflected on a written task she had set her Year 11 classes on Macbeth. At our suggestion she described the task under five headings: content expected, genre, audience, purpose and level of abstraction. As she described the task she realised that she had not made clear what genre she expected, and that she had not discussed with the students the level of abstraction. As she described the task she realised that she had not made clear what genre she expected, and that she had not discussed with the students the level of abstraction that was appropriate.

She had expected them to show reasoning supported by evidence from the text. But as they were preparing the work, she had encouraged them to express their own opinions of the play. Many of them had done just that, making bold, uncompromising, often naive statements which were genuinely believed and egocentrically expressed with little reference to the play. Clearly, the pieces of writing that resulted could not be taken as evidence that the students were weak in writing about literature, since they had been given no opportunity to internalise the criteria the teacher had been taking for granted.

This taking stock may be - perhaps should be - a joint undertaking of teacher and pupils. Such a joint exploration will not simply sharpen the teacher's understanding of how pupils have perceived the unit; it will also aid the students to develop skills of self-evaluation.

3. Appreciating/Judging

The products of many units will be the subject of appreciation rather than judgment. The group play or cassette tape, the posters and the collage may be more appropriately the subject of appreciation by teacher and class than the subject of some grading process. Inevitably, however, some products will be judged by the teacher, either in terms of each student's past performance (to see if he/she is developing) or in terms of the student's performance relative to other students. Where either of these two kinds of judgment is to occur, part of the teacher's role in the monitoring and reflecting stages will have been to make sure that students are aware, not only that such judging will take place, but also of the criteria upon which the judging will be based. Ideally, students should be judged only on aspects of language performance that have been part of the learning process, monitored and reflected upon.

In practice, however, schools' assessment schedules often force teachers to grade or mark students' work before they have internalised the relevant criteria. Because of this, it is most important that students know that judgments are redeemable, that later successes will wipe the slate clean

It is shameful that low marks or grades given early in a term or year are often counted in determining the students' final grades; when this happens we are penalising the students for needing teaching! We emphasise that stages one and two of the model, monitoring and reflecting, are confidential to the learning process, and that failed experiments occurring in the process of learning are not to be held against a student when the time for judgment arrives.

Students need to understand that the teacher's role in these first two stages is non-judgmental. It may well be, however, that years of negative reinforcement will defeat the teacher's best efforts to convince students that they are not being judged all the time; that it is possible for the teacher to adopt a non-judgmental role. Furthermore, most teachers admit to giving higher marks to those who follow their advice. In such circumstances, a teacher's suggestions during the process of a unit will assume the status of imperatives; the students will feel that rejection of a teacher's suggestions is a recipe for failure. They will be encouraged to accept the teacher's advice uncritically. Where such attitudes prevail, the only sensible step is to hand the task of judging over to outsiders, that is, other teachers. This has been tried successfully in schools in both Adelaide (Cooke et al, 1982) and Sydney. Teachers report that with this scheme, it becomes a matter of "we will do this" rather than "you will do this". They help students more; the students see the point of redrafting because the work is going to another audience (not the class teacher who has often already understood what they are trying to express); it is up to the students to decide which suggestions of the teacher they will use. The use of external judges has been reported by an American teacher (Burnette, 1980), and the South Australian experiment is currently the subject of detailed evaluation by Brian Johnston. Where such outside judgment is to occur, the reflecting stage becomes one in which teacher and students discuss the criteria upon which they want the work to be judged. The teacher then has the task of articulating these

criteria to the outside judges (a valuable exercise in itself!)

4. Looking Back/Looking Ahead

The final stage in the model is one which encourages both teacher and students to look back over the unit to determine what has been achieved. For the teacher, this retrospective assessment of what has gone on will determine the directions to be taken in the following weeks. How have the students coped with the work? What individual strengths and weaknesses have been revealed? What individual goals might students set themselves? Is consolidation needed in particular areas, or is a change of direction required? (A checklist of experiences to be undertaken during the year is a useful aid at this point, for it helps to ensure balance in the English classroom).

The degree to which students are involved in this review will depend on how articulately they can describe their work. (The development of this ability is a principal goal of stage one of the model). In some South Australian schools, students are keeping records of what they have been able to do in their written and oral work, as well as examples of work which they consider shows merit, and are formulating goals relating to areas where they plan to experiment. After receiving judgments from an external marker these students are recording their feelings about the judgments and are making statements about future goals, if the judgments stimulate these.

The students are also asked to identify occasions during a unit when they feel:

- excited
- anxious or uptight
- annoyed or disappointed
- satisfied

The teacher suggests that learning is likely to involve all of these feelings. They are then asked to identify actions they might take themselves, or requests they might have of the teacher or class, which might lead to their gaining more satisfaction from the course and from their own work.

These are then discussed, first in small groups and later in the whole-class situation. Of course the approach presupposes that the teacher will listen to the students' requests and attempt to meet them. If the requests contradict the teacher's own requirements, negotiation of a mutually acceptable solution is required in the manner of the 'students win/teacher wins' model of Teacher Effectiveness Training (Gordon, 1974). Rebellious students often become very involved in this feedback and negotiation process and begin to speak of themselves as serious students of English (Johnston, 1983b).

Conclusion

By identifying four separate roles in the evaluation process, we hope to encourage teachers to give highest priority to monitoring students' work. This is a workshop approach to learning where students are not held accountable for their errors: the emphasis is on experimenting, learning from failures and articulately recognising successes.

Secondly, we hope that teachers will reflect on the nature of the tasks they set, and recognise that sometimes work which does not match their ideal answer may well be an adequate, even courageous attempt to complete a vaguely defined task. Thirdly, we hope that teachers will give the students purchase over the judgmental aspect of evaluation by allowing them to select work to be judged and by allowing them to redeem early failures.

Finally, we hope that teachers and students will work together to record each student's strengths and goals for future work; the aim is that the emphasis be on the positive expectation that the students can learn, rather than an inarticulate labelling of their work on the basis of their supposed abilities. Our model has been favourably received by many teachers and we are currently preparing detailed reports of how teachers apply it in the classroom (Johnston, 1983c)

- (1) We would like to acknowledge the help of Edina Eisikovits, Keith Heckenberg, Graham Little and Rosalind Strong in the development of the model.

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